

New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1951

Volume XII, Number 22

Rachel W. Coffin, Editor

Week of October 29, 1951

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NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST

NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

NEW YORK MIRROR

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"The Fourposter"

Daily Mirror

October 25, 1951

Tandy and Cronyn Score In Two-Character Play

By ROBERT COLEMAN

It takes virtuoso acting to make a two-character play absorbing for an entire evening. The Playwrights' Company has been fortunate indeed in having Jessica Tandy and Hume Cronyn to co-star in Jan de Hartog's "The Fourposter." Their pretending is fascinating to watch.

Miss Tandy and Cronyn (Mr. and Mrs.), under Jose Ferrer's skilful direction, impersonate with evocative feeling a married couple in a domestic cavalcade covering a period of 35 years. They love intensely, and hate compassionately on occasion. They rear a son and daughter, see them wed, and finally move from the genteel mansion with which their lives have been associated for so long.

The comedy takes its title from a huge, ornate bed with a tester

that changes with the decades. It is a most serviceable background for much of the action necessary to sustain a tour de force. It is infinitely superior as a prop to the customary telephone, maid or butler, who never appear but project their voices through a door.

De Hartog has penned a literate, human and sentimental chronicle. And Miss Tandy and Cronyn illuminate it with distinction. Their playing has warmth

and glow. They garner solid laughs without resorting to jarring farcical devices. They create emotion that is decent and dignified. They achieve impact that is honest.

Miss Tandy, in handsome Lucinda Ballard period costumes, is a joy to the eyes. She knows how to manage a pictorial effect without being obvious about it. Her voice seems smaller than we last remember it, and it is pitched to a high, flute-like level. But she uses it beautifully. It is almost coloratura speaking. Her diction is admirable. We suggest that some of our fledgling actresses study it.

Miss Tandy has by all odds the bravura role. Cronyn has the less showy part. However, it falls to him to pace the action and dialogue. He is in the driver's seat much of the time, and is a deft steersman. Often he scores with pantomime, at which he is expert. He makes the lifting of an eyebrow or the compression of his lips say volumes.

Ferrer has staged the play with commendable resource and invention, and Syrjala has contributed a bedroom setting that is atmospherically helpful.

"THE FOURPOSTER"

Play by Jan de Hartog; staged by Jose Ferrer; setting by Syrjala; costumes by Lucinda Ballard; presented by The Playwrights' Company at the Barrymore Theatre, October 24, 1951. The cast: Agnes..... Jessica Tandy Michael..... Hume Cronyn

Synopsis: Act I, Scene 1, 1890. Scene 2, A year later. Act II, Scene 1, 1901. Scene 2, Seven years later. Act III, Scene 1, 1913. Scene 2, Twelve years later.

It's good to have another hit on Broadway. It's good to chuckle again, to be moved again, to relish superior talents at work on the stage. We enjoyed "The Fourposter" immensely, though it is primarily the type of play that has an especial appeal for women. And the approval of the ladies, keen students of the modern theatre tell us, is an invaluable asset toward success. In our book, a visit to the Ethel Barrymore is imperative.

DAILY NEWS

October 25, 1951

Jessica Tandy and Hume Cronyn Bewitching in 'The Fourposter'

By JOHN CHAPMAN

"The Fourposter," which the Playwrights' Company presented last evening at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre, goes to show that it's easy when you know how. Nothing to it, really. If you should want to cheer up a rather desperate stage season by presenting an irresistible comedy, you needn't go to much bother about the job. All you need is one playwright, one director and two actors and you're happily in business.

Of course, it might be well to have Jan de Hartog as the playwright, Jose Ferrer as the director and Jessica Tandy and Hume Cronyn as the actors—if you can get them. Right now they are working for the Playwrights at the Barrymore and I don't think they will be available soon. Twice in one

week, now, four people have made the theatre come alive—Laughton, Boyer, Moorehead and Hardwicke in "Don Juan in Hell" and the quartet responsible for "The Fourposter."

New Acting Team.

Mr. de Hartog's comedy is as thin as a hotel canape—but much tastier. It relates, in six brief

scenes, several unsurprising events in the married lives of two quite normal—even ordinary—people. Its message is the simplest of the simple: Mama loves Papa. Yet its charm is great.

Around me last evening, in the theatre and on the rain-soaked sidewalk (the Barrymore marquee has sprung a big leak), people were coupling the names of Tandy and Cronyn with those of Lunt and Fontanne. I knew what they meant. They didn't mean that the married actors in "The Fourposter" were like the slick and glittering Lunts, but they did mean that here were two players with enough grace, skill and wit to hold a stage—and an audience—all by themselves. Miss Tandy and Mr. Cronyn are continuously endearing, from the

moment he carries her into a bedroom for a tremulous and touching wedding night until they leave that room and their fourposter 23 years later, to take quarters in a smaller house.

No Sex Farce.

The bed is the play, but "The Fourposter" is no sex farce. It is a gentle, beautifully mannered, human comedy in which the article of furniture is the symbol rather than the center of married life. It stands ungracefully in a corner and witnesses the happiness and the big little tragedies of the wedded state. It sees blissful moments and angry ones... and when the play is over it has been made ready to greet a new young pair of newlyweds who without doubt will repeat all the same familiar scenes.

I cannot quarrel with anything that went on at the Barrymore last evening. Mr. Ferrer's direction strikes me as being of the best quality—for one never is conscious of it. Miss Tandy and Mr. Cronyn are perfect down to the smallest detail of the actor's art, and the Syrjala set and Lucinda Ballard costumes, which span the period from 1890 to 1913, fit the play and players most admirably.

"The Fourposter"—continued

The New York Times

October 25, 1951

Jessica Tandy and Hume Cronyn in Two-Character Play About Marriage

By BROOKS ATKINSON

After the ordeal of last week it is a pleasure to be in the presence of professionals again. Jan de Hartog's "The Fourposter," which opened at the Ethel Barrymore last evening, is literate and professional work all the way through. It is a two-character play in which Jessica Tandy and Hume Cronyn complete the cast.

Frankly, no one else is needed. Although most two-character plays are stunts that are put together with painful ingenuity, "The Fourposter" is a complete play in its

own right without benefit of the telephone or off-stage noises and voices. Once in a while, it seems thin. It never seems spurious or forced.

In the most economical sort of outline, it is the story of thirty-five years in the married life of Agnes and Michael. Nothing of unusual importance happens. They are shy on their wedding night. They have their first child in a year. They differ strenuously—even dangerously—over social behavior and the training of children; and twice they are on the verge of separating. Nothing very extraordinary happens.

But Mr. De Hartog, the Dutch writer, has managed to skeletonize it with great understanding and skill. Seen through the commonplace experiences of Agnes and Michael, marriage looks ludicrous at times; occasionally it is downright impossible. But it is frequently tender; and sometimes it is poignant.

Although Mr. De Hartog is not cracking stupid jokes, he relishes the familiar humors of life in the

home. Although he is not solemn, he respects his characters and the ancient institution they are illustrating. "The Fourposter" is the most civilized comedy we have had on marriage for years. The writing is so compact and simple that you may not realize at once how good it is.

It is beautifully staged, set and acted. For scenery Syrjala has designed a quietly livable and attractive bedroom that undergoes minor but illuminating changes through the years. Mr. Ferrer's direction is relaxed, pointed and amusing; and it is not afraid of a broad joke now and then.

Since Miss Tandy and Mr. Cronyn are married off-stage as well as on, they act their parts together with the greatest symmetry; and, also, of course, you don't have to worry about the finality of things that seem to be happening on the stage. You know that in any third act the Cronyns can take it.

Costumed in Lucinda Ballard's enchanting, old-fashioned dresses,

Miss Tandy skims lightly through the follies and crises of Agnes' married life. She is slight in her style of playing, but gleaming in spirit; and she manages to suggest more interior restlessness and fury than Mr. De Hartog specifies in his lines.

If Michael is not the best part Mr. Cronyn has had on the stage, it is certainly one of the best, and Mr. Cronyn gives it a capital performance. His rapture, his anxiety, his petulance and his bewilderment are all vastly entertaining, they are so terribly solemn and earnest. And his wonder over the diabolical complexity of a woman is uproarious.

Although the surface of the performance is plain enough, Miss Tandy and Mr. Cronyn manage to play with a subtle rhythm that is droll when it is not affecting and moving. There are some casual universal truths at the core of their acting—and at the core of the play as well. So far "The Fourposter" is the pleasantest comedy of the season. It is also wonderfully professional.

Journal of the American

October 25, 1951

Sensitively Acted And Produced

By ROBERT GARLAND

Two-character plays have been shown before last night's "The Fourposter" at the Ethel Barrymore. Although something of an acting stunt, they're not necessarily unrewarding. This one by Jan de Hartog, the Dutchman whose "This Time Tomorrow" and "Skipper Next to God" have been tried on Broadway, has Jessica Tandy and Hume Cronyn in it.

"The Fourposter" is most like Henry Myers' "The First Fifty Years," which Larry Hart and Irving Strouse produced at the Princess in 1922. Clare Eames and Tom Powers were an Ann and a Martin and you saw them in a New York apartment on

their paper, wooden, tin, crystal, silver and golden wedding anniversaries. It was well done.

So is "The Fourposter" twenty-nine years later. Miss Tandy and Mr. Cronyn, wife and husband on and off the stage, act it out with admirable underplaying. They've been practicing on the road and their Agnes and Michael are, to tell the truth, more than the playwright ordered. You get to know them, even if somewhat episodically.

I write "somewhat episodically" because of the third-try Hollanders.

Jan de Hartog is still not a very skillful dramatist. Certainly he isn't an inventive one. This time

he thinks up an Agnes and a Michael, sees that they are married, and then leaves them to the ever-present actors. And the director, who is Jose Ferrer, and the atmosphere, which is helpfully nostalgic. And about as American as "Carousel."

You meet Agnes and Michael in 1890. You take leave of them in 1925. They enter a spare bedroom of Michael's house with him carrying her across the threshold. She is a bride. And the fourposter which lends the play its name, occupies a goodly portion of the chamber. The bed is on an impressive pedestal, as befits the center of dramaturgy.

In and around this majestic sleeping place, Jan de Hartog's vehicle for Jessica Tandy and Hume Cronyn has its being. Agnes and Michael are the usual turn-of-the-century married couple. They have at least two children. He commits an indiscretion. She doesn't love him any more. Their offspring marry and leave them lonesome and alone.

At last they pack up and leave, fussing about a tiny pillow as they depart.

That's all there is, there isn't any more. But there's a slew of

tender little touches, a wealth of wise little details, supplied by the actors and the director. These, I'm sure, will delight you even more than they delighted me. Agnes and Michael are very man-and-wife-at the Ethel Barrymore. They, as goes without saying, should be.

Miss Tandy and Mr. Cronyn make them very human, too. They never play them up. They always play them down. They work together skillfully and agreeably; their quarrels are more highly civilized than you would at first believe. They grow older, thirty-five years older, until Walter Huston could readily sing "September Song" about them.

The Playwrights' Company has given "The Fourposter" a good production. Upon Jessica Tandy and Hume Cronyn, Jose Ferrer bestows his most sensitive direction. The changing costumes by Lucinda Ballard are picturesque. The changing setting by Syrjala is time-setting. I don't see how Lilli Palmer, Rex Harrison and their moving-picture minions can be doing it any better.

The legitimate theatre is alive and ticking once more on Broadway.

"The Fourposter"—continued

NEW YORK
Herald Tribune

October 25, 1951

By **WALTER F. KERR**

Salute to Marriage

A SMALL and gentle cartoon of married life has come to the Barrymore, and Jessica Tandy and Hume Cronyn are playing it with such affection and inventiveness that it is a pity to have to report that, in final effect, it is just a shade too plain and a shade too familiar for a thoroughly winning evening in the theatre.

"The Fourposter" is Jan de Hartog's salute to an enduring marriage. He has written it as a two-character play, and he has hurdled this particular difficulty with remarkable skill. He does not overstrain the device with awkward attempts to create a large and bustling cast of off-stage characters, and he does not really make you wish for the entrance of the few you do hear about.

What he does make you wish for is that heightened imagination, that sharper insight, which might turn these little vignettes—scenes of bickering, of making up, of averted catastrophes, of light-hearted fooling—into pithy, telling, and maybe heart-breaking reminders of your own experience.

In telling his story of a twenty-five-year marriage, Mr. de Hartog passes over none of the standard moments of fear, pathos and unconscious comedy. The play begins with Michael carrying Agnes over the threshold and into the bedroom, which is to be the single setting for our pastel little cavalcade. In the second scene, a year later, Michael must run for the family doctor. In the third, ten years later, Michael is prevented from losing his head over another woman.

The fourth scene details the couple's shocked realization that their son is growing up, the fifth takes place on the day of their daughter's wedding, and the last scene finds the bedroom being dismantled and Michael once more

carrying Agnes across the threshold.

In all of this there is some charm and a fair share of quietly engaging humor. But the author never gets quite far enough away from the stock treatment of his materials to startle us into fresh delight with them. When Michael's son is about to be born, he exclaims "I can't wait to take him fishing!" When the boy, now seventeen, begins to taste of the fleshpots, Michael speaks of him to Agnes as "Your son!" These are clichés of the family saga school, and they turn up just often enough to keep you from surrendering wholly to Mr. de Hartog's particular couple.

The couple are sensitively, almost painstakingly, played by Miss Tandy and Mr. Cronyn. The prospect of going down life's highway with Miss Tandy is, in any event, an attractive one, and the actress brings as much fire to some first-act roughhouse as she does delicacy to the play's closing moments. As if her loveliness were

not enough, she is a performer of spirit and rare tartness.

There is a quality of unction in Mr. Cronyn's acting style which puts him at his best in his vainer and more pompous moments, at his least effective in the earlier romantic scenes. Toward the close of the play he has a scene of silence and defeat which is striking in its control and in its suggestion; and he is always an intelligent actor.

Jose Ferrer has directed the production with a clean economy of effect and a good bit of helpful pantomime. If the stage business is just once in awhile a bit broader than the style of the play—as Michael runs for the doctor, he pauses to move the basinette closer to Agnes—it is managed so firmly and with so little embellishment as to seem to belong.

In short, all concerned have done much to bring warmth and vitality to a difficult theatrical task. If the play persists in seeming warmed-over, that is Mr. de Hartog's fault.

New York Post

October 25, 1951

By **Richard Watts Jr.**

Joys and Sorrows of Married Life

Possibly married people will find some subtle quality in "The Fourposter" that eluded the dull critical eye of this sullen bachelor reviewer. It was my impression, however, that the new two-character play by the Dutch dramatist, Jan de Hartog, which opened last night at the Ethel Barrymore

Theater, was a tedious and uneventful chronicle of the uninteresting married life of a fairly tiresome couple, and that the performances of its pair of actors, Jessica Tandy and Hume Cronyn, while competent, couldn't lift it into liveliness.

Actually, there isn't anything much wrong with "The Fourposter," save that it is unable to make either the husband and wife or their marriage seem worth a three-act contemplation. The narrative is real and credible enough, but Mr. de Hartog doesn't do much more to illuminate the illus-

trious institution of matrimony than you will find in the innumerable comic strips on the subject, and he isn't as inventive or amusing as the best of them. For all its detailed study of 33 years of married life, the new play is oddly superficial.

The Chronicle

"The Fourposter" begins on the wedding night of its protagonists, Agnes and Michael, in 1890, with the shy bride and the slightly bewildered groom a little frightened at what has happened

to them. You see them next a year later, as their first child is about to be born. By 1901, Michael, who is an author, is thinking of going off with a woman who is more fervent than the wife in her praise for his books. Seven years later, they are worried about their children. In 1913, the wife is the one who is thinking of going off with someone else. You last see them 12 years later, as they are about to move from their old home.

I was glad that they stuck it out, and I am happy to be told that they looked back on their marriage as quite a success, although, as all comic strips on the subject tell us, there seemed to be more squabbles than pleasures in their history. But Mr. de Hartog, whose plays never seem to satisfy me, is not, I think, ever able to make the story of a lifetime of marriage moving or really humorous or in any way revealing. He provides a lot of incidents about the marriage, but, to the end, the husband and wife are but superficially contemplated.

Two-Character Plays

With all proper respect for

Miss Tandy and Mr. Cronyn, I must admit that I kept hoping that just one other character would turn up. The playwright is considerably fairer to his audience than most authors of two-character works, because he doesn't keep falling back on the radio or the telephone or off-stage voices to keep his story going. But, unless it is done with great skill, the play with only two actors remains pretty much a stunt, and a fairly monotonous one, at that, and this is what "The Fourposter" is.

This is not to deny that it is ably acted. Miss Tandy is an exceptionally skillful player and Mr. Cronyn a competent one, and they do everything possible to keep things moving along, but they cannot fight off the pall of monotony that hangs over the proceedings. Lucinda Ballard's costumes add a genuine period charm to the play, and Jose Ferrer's direction seems lively enough. It may be that the pleasure of recognition will make "The Fourposter" interesting to many spectators, but I found it commonplace and superficial.



New York World-Telegram
and
The Sun

October 25, 1951

2-Character Play A 2-Cronyn Triumph

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Mr. and Mrs. Hume Cronyn, the latter being Jessica Tandy, may well have last night set a course for the rest of their acting careers, with the two-character comedy "The Fourposter."

One suspects that they can appear in this touching little sweetheart of a play as long or as often as they like. It is gentle, simple, entirely recognizable and ever

winning. Oddly enough, it is what does not happen that makes it interesting and what the participants do not do, that gives it quality.

By description the play must sound next to nothing. It is an episodic story of a marriage. From the wedding night in 1890, till the early morning in 1925, when they sell their house, this couple loves and argues, pulls apart and is

drawn together, with frank passion and great charm.

Trickery? Wrong!

The moment you hear that a play has only two characters, you are likely to suspect trickery. In "The Fourposter" there is only once an offstage sound, a bell; never a phone, and no stunts to make up or fill in for people who ought to be there.

The husband is jealous of their first baby and later the wife is jealous of his success. They argue over bringing up their children and over their in-laws.

Only once does outright laughter suspend. The wife has a desperate moment, after her younger child's marriage, when she wants to make up for the strict convention of her life. The brief, hopeless answer seems to run away. But love, and by now, the habit of love, are too strong.

And No Phony Emphasis.

In the end they are moving and have sold the old family bed because it is too big for a new apart-

ment. On their way, they fuss about a tiny old pillow. The wife wants to leave it for the newcomers. To her it says that the bed has a happy history and marriage is good.

The play is all heart. Under Jose Ferrer's warm direction, the Cronyns give an exquisite display of mutual adoration, in character, and as actors. They work together beautifully and never need to press a point or drag in any phony emphasis.

Often they establish the mood of a scene before the curtain is fully up with a concentrated look. When once they fall to and battle physically their antagonism turns subtly to attraction with complete believability. And their irritations and vanities are so real they live.

The room with its big bed and the timely changes of decors by Sybil's is most recognizable. Lucinda Ballard's costumes make decorative comment of their own on changing times.

Everybody around the Barrymore ought to be mighty happy.

"Don Juan in Hell"

The New York Times

October 23, 1951

AT THE THEATRE

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Since the First Drama Quartette is composed of extraordinary actors, their reading, as they call it, of Shaw's "Don Juan in Hell" is a mighty and moving occasion. They are Charles Boyer, Charles Laughton, Cedric Hardwicke and Agnes Moorehead. Attired in evening clothes and standing before microphones they pretend that they are going to read their parts from a manuscript of the drama.

But they are actors. The reading they gave last evening at Carnegie Hall is a thrilling performance. For they have looked below the surface gabble of Shaw's lines into their meaning; and without forgetting that he has a sardonic style, they have become his advocates. This is not only a performance but an intellectual crusade, and the First Drama Quartette comes to New York bearing ideas, ideals and philosophical passion.

As far as the records of our enterprising office show, the "Don Juan in Hell" scene has never been acted professionally in New York. It is published in the texts as the third act of "Man and Superman,"

but generally it is shaken out of that comedy by producers who want to get their audiences home before the milkman appears. When Maurice Evans put on his hard and glittering performance of "Man and Superman" in 1947, he considered staging the Don Juan scene for special occasions, as they are now doing in London, but nothing came of his project.

Since it was written separately, it is logical to play it as an independent enterprise, and since it looks almost unactable in the texts, the scheme of presenting it as a reading is not only legitimate but inspired. For it is a closely reasoned argument for the validity of Shaw's thesis of creative evolution—compact, written with unrelieved brilliance on one plane of rationalization, two of the four characters talking in the same idiom and with the same intensity of intellectual excitement.

At least to Shavians it is an immensely stimulating argument. It is paradoxical in its point of view, witty in its analysis of human manners and institutions, and alert and humorous. But there is something more stirring than that about it. It is a rousing statement of faith from a man of thought, erudition and independence. For it presents the thesis that mankind has a future, that he can keep on lifting himself up by his bootstraps, as he has done in the past.

Shaw wrote it in 1901 and it is possible that he might not have believed so passionately in the future of the race after the shatter-

ing experiences of two world wars. He is not on hand to defend or reject it now. But the drive and shining convictions of his humorous declaration of principle are mighty heartening now.

If there is any dramatic talk equal to it in New York today, it crackles out of "Saint Joan," which was written by the same genius about eighteen years later when he was not feeling quite so breezy. Shaw has been the dominant dramatist in New York ever since the last war. Apparently he is still outdazzling his juniors this year.

The two best parts are those of Don Juan and the Devil. They could hardly be played with more eloquence or understanding. As the Devil, moon-faced Mr. Laughton acts with diabolical gusto and gives dramatic weight to the whole performance. The long, closely-reasoned speeches he gives with great spontaneity, putting the emphasis where it belongs, using the words carefully, pointing the meaning with gestures and movements. Call it a masterful performance and you cannot be wrong.

And Mr. Boyer's performance is masterly, also. As Don Juan, he plays the part that Shaw believes in, and he has all the constructive thought on his side. Since the prose is crisp and distinguished, it is a pity that Mr. Boyer does not speak English with more facility. There are linguistic points in the dialogue that he blunders over. But we can take him gratefully on his own terms, for he is a great actor with fire and integrity. Shaw

"DON JUAN IN HELL"

Play by Bernard Shaw; staged by Charles Laughton; presented by Paul Gregory at Carnegie Hall, October 22, 1951. The cast: Don Juan..... Charles Boyer
The Devil..... Charles Laughton
The Statue..... Cedric Hardwicke
Donna Anna... Agnes Moorehead

could not speak for creative evolution with half the grandeur Mr. Boyer has put into his acting.

Cedric Hardwicke is in fine fettle as The Statue, or Shaw's professional Englishman. He plays it with grace, subtlety and wit. He was not half so skilful and amusing when he was playing "Caesar and Cleopatra" here a few years ago. As the only woman in the play, Agnes Moorehead acts the respectability and propriety with tongue-in-cheek humor, and has caught the vivacity of the whole occasion.

For this is a performance compounded of sheer skill, and it will never be forgotten by anyone in Carnegie Hall last evening. Next Thursday the First Drama Quartette will perform in the Brooklyn Academy of Music. At the end of November they will return for about a month at a theatre yet to be selected in New York. Everyone who loves great writing and great acting will want to hear this simple but inspired reading.

"Don Juan in Hell"—continued



New York World-Telegram
and
The Sun

October 23, 1951

'Don Juan in Hell' A Memorable Reading

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Decades from now those of us who are around will find occasion still to talk about the First Drama Quartette and its presentation of Bernard Shaw's "Don Juan in Hell."

It is both brilliant and generous. Brilliant because it conveys so expertly a glittering argument that is allowed to progress entirely on its own terms. Nothing interferes with the words.

It is generous because it leaves

so much to your own imagination. You supply what setting and action you want, no more.

The four stars, in evening dress, sit on high, black stools before a black curtain, with scripts on music stands before them, and convenient floor-stand microphones. This formal tableau gives the production a simple physical pattern from which the actors depart, knowing the lines, to move toward each other, or toward the

audience as the need arises.

The argument becomes vital and alive, as it never could be embellished with elaborate trimming.

Shaw is having another of his fascinating says about men, women, morals, love and life. Along with familiar sparkling explosions of bigotry, he here uses the restless rascality of Don Juan to explain the urge of worthwhile men to improve the world.

The argument takes the form of a complex paradox. It is colorful, witty, masterful and mystifying in turn.

Charles Boyer as the Don has the heaviest role, and performs it with his own matchless magnetism. He rises to real grandeur in the longer speeches. His variety of delivery, and vocal color and positiveness permit him immeasurable authority in this complex part.

Charles Laughton plays the Devil, but he is much more than that. He has given the reading its stringent, tasteful direction, and throughout the performance he seems invisibly to rein the pace and spirits of the others. His own

sly humor is always fresh seasoning.

Cedric Hardwicke plays the Statue, the traditional military man. In lines it is a smaller role, but with timing, gesture and a full realization of the character's self-satisfaction, he makes it a solid quantity of high value in the mixture.

Agnes Moorehead is a revelation as Donna Anna, who would like to get from Hell to Heaven, she thinks. The actress has the crisp, clean elegance of a lily. She falls into exquisite poses and moves like a self-appointed queen, to give the play its chief visual distraction. It is a lovely performance.

The show is a mental limbering exercise, a relaxing pastime or a gay appeal to the imagination. Call it a radiantly dramatized lecture, or a play designed to ardently inspire your own invention. Either way it is unforgettable.

Journal American

October 23, 1951.

Initial Local Reading, Of Shaw's 'Don Juan'

By ROBERT GARLAND

The First Drama Quartette, of which we have been hearing, was presented last night by its impresario, Paul Gregory, at Carnegie Hall. Made up of Charles Laughton, Charles Boyer, Cedric Hardwicke and Agnes Moorehead, it gave the initial public reading of Bernard Shaw's "Don Juan in Hell" in New York City. For the most part, it is the third act of "Man and Superman."

The evening was not as felicitous as it could have been. The microphones were not properly adjusted, so there were disturbing cries of "Louder, Louder!" from the congregation, which was of overwhelming size. This led to uneasiness on the part of

the readers and restlessness on the part of the listeners. Both the uneasiness and the restlessness were not too readily dispelled.

One member of the First Drama Quartette never did get over the unfortunate beginning. Mr. Boyer, who read the long and exacting speeches allotted to Don Juan, let his accent, which was barely worrisome in "Red Gloves," get in his way. He could not get it out. This, in turn, affected the three other readers. And the congregation deserved a safer sound equipment. . . .

They Looked Well

After a gracious explanation by Charles Laughton, Charles Boyer,

Cedric Hardwicke and Agnes Moorehead came on in single file. The men wore dinner suits, the woman evening dress. They looked smart, you may believe me, against a severe black velvet drop. There were microphones, one to a reader, plain and unadjusted. And reading stands, mostly for reassurance.

Mr. Laughton read for The Devil. Mr. Boyer read for Don Juan. Mr. Hardwicke read for The Statue. Miss Moorehead read for Donna Anna. Each did a bit of non-acting on the side. The devil's advocate was the most effective. It was non-acting such as Charles Laughton alone can do. The others, as often as they could, aided and abetted the big non-actor.

Cedric Hardwicke who, as The Statue, hadn't much to do, did that little well. He came forth whenever Bernard Shaw let him and talked up like a man. Agnes Moorehead, looking like some haunting Florentine painting I have seen, was always in the picture. Even in her long sustained repose. And have you ever heard her do "Sorry, Wrong Number?" There's a thriller. . . .

Holds Up Well

The third act of "Man and Superman," never played in public in

America, holds up well after 50 years of silence. Maurice Evans, who did Bernard Shaw's "Comedy and Philosophy" most recently in America, promised to appear in it. He never did. So it remained for Charles Laughton, Charles Boyer, Cedric Hardwicke and Agnes Moorehead to do it for him. They do!

They didn't do it as well as Maurice Evans might have done it last night at Carnegie Hall. And don't let them tell you that they did. But, after the bad start was partly righted, it made an enjoyable Shavian evening. There is enough wit and wisdom for every play in town, with a bit left over. It may be familiar after half a century. But it's good.

Incidentally, Bernard Shaw's stage directions, his sort of side-remarks, were read by Mr. Laughton or Mr. Hardwicke. These added to the enjoyment of the evening. The folks out front, who were on their best behavior, listened attentively. It was an audience to be proud of, surrounded by naughty microphones, varying accents and much that has been omitted. . . .

They looked well, those First Drama Quartettes at Carnegie Hall.

By **WALTER F. KERR**

This Is Theater!

IT is one of those theatrical ironies that the most stimulating show in New York last night is no longer available this morning. Charles Boyer, Charles Laughton, Cedric Hardwicke, and Agnes Moorehead have banded together to call themselves The First Drama Quartette, and they are barnstorming the country with the "Don Juan in Hell" scene from "Man and Superman."

Their appearance at Carnegie Hall last night was a clear victory for the spoken word, spoken well. Without benefit of scenery or dramatic costume, the four performers placed themselves at microphones and proceeded to read the daylight out of a long, discursive, but magnificentlyactable treatise. Until now the season has

offered us an abundance of scenery and swaths of costuming, all gathered about a stupefying dramatic vacancy. The Drama Quartette has turned the tables, thrown out what was both expensive and unnecessary, and filled the vacuum with fire, intelligence, and emotional power.

"Don Juan in Hell" is not a play, or even a part of a play. It is a debate and that is how the foursome is presenting it.

But it is by no means a stodgy or formal, or rhetorical debate. The actors come at it with passion, with slyness, with tremendous enjoyment. Nor do they abandon mime altogether. They are on their feet impatiently fiddling with eyeglasses to make a point, giving themselves over to a remarkable unthibited use of theatrical gesture. And, although they are separated by stools and microphones, they achieve a greater air of playing together than any other acting company this season.

The first act is Mr. Laughton's, the second Mr. Boyer's. Laughton opens the evening with a modest and ingratiating setting of the

stage. But the shyness, the coy mannerisms, do not conceal the fact that he is a killer. Mr. Laughton is out for blood, and within a very few minutes he is drawing it. He wags his head, chucks his chin into his collar, goes in for the twinkle and double-twinkle and then—just as you are afraid that some damage is to be done by way of excessive cuteness—he lets rip with Shaw's blasting of man as a creature essentially in love with death, in a manner that tears him to tatters, but not the sense of the speech. This may be ham, but it is delicious.

Boyer's work in the first act is relatively disappointing. He must cope not only with an accent but with the fact that the lighter and more impudent of Shaw's lines are essentially English in feeling, and the rhythm of the language works against him, too. But in the latter portions of the play, when Shaw is at his most serious and persuasive, the opportunities for straightforward and dynamic reading become greater, and Boyer rises to a level of emotional performance which may not have been matched

on the New York stage for some years. There is a moment when he seizes his microphone and thrusts it forward in a spasm of urgency which is at least twice as exciting as the top thrill in an ordinary melodrama. Mr. Boyer is one of the finest performers we have.

Cedric Hardwicke, in a role which calls for less virtuosic activity, is a model of adroit underplaying. Agnes Moorehead, who is given the least interesting lines, is striking to watch as she makes her all too pitiful defense of her sex against the onslaughts Shaw has written for Don Juan.

The evening is not without its restive moments, though they are few. Some of Shaw's lines—and even the rough outlines of his thought—have been so quoted and cribbed in the last fifty years as to leave them a little lamer now than they might have been. And, with Shaw's passion for taking every side of a question, there are some passages which have come to mean almost nothing at all. But these are small discomforts in an enormously exhilarating exhibition of literate wit and flashing performance.

Daily Mirror

October 23, 1951

**Drama Quartet Scores In
'Don Juan in Hell'**

By **ROBERT COLEMAN**

There's a new show business. It lines up a few stars, microphones and props, and takes to the road. It laughs at elaborate, expensive settings and costumes and the consequent high transportation costs. There is only one catch to it. You've got to have a superlative script.

Paul Gregory, of Hollywood, is cashing in on this new idea. For many weeks, he has been touring The First Drama Quartet in George Bernard Shaw's "Don Juan in Hell," the seldom-given dream sequence from "Man and Superman." The members of this eminent ensemble, as you may have read, are Charles Boyer, Charles Laughton, Cedric Hardwicke and Agnes Moorehead.

Last evening, Gregory gave

New Yorkers the opportunity to enjoy this novel divertissement at Carnegie Hall. Due to the terrific demand for tickets, he is attempting to schedule other dates there later in the season, if his stars can arrange their prior commitments. "Don Juan" and its brilliant interpreters are well worth your while.

It is easy to understand why this interlude is so rarely pre-

sented. "Man and Superman" plays infinitely better without it. Yet it packs some of the most trenchant, provocative and rewarding of the dialogue. True, it is talky, and its drama is mental rather than physical. This is by all odds the right way to savor it.

Before a black stage drop are placed four microphones, high black stools and accompanying reading stands. Laughton, who arranged the presentation, appears first, offering a brief background of the Don Juan legend, upon which Shaw comments. Boyer, Hardwicke and Miss Moorehead then join him, each bearing a handsomely bound copy of the script. Though they make but infrequent references to these, they lend a somewhat pictorial and informal air to the proceedings.

The result is very much like sitting in your living room and listening to four charming talkers, who have just read a great book, discuss it, conveying its quotable lines most effectively. Only drinks in hand and canapes are lacking to fulfill the atmo-

sphere of a smart drawing room.

The audience got into the spirit of Laughton's conception of an informed and witty group casually chatting and gradually becoming passionately worked up over the more important points at issue. The first-nighters broke into spontaneous applause as each of the quartet scored.

In "Don Juan," Shaw dissects the cosmic urge, marriage, science, war, religion, literature, politics and just about anything else you care to name. If a few of his observations seem a little dated today, most of them are fresh, beautifully put and stimulating. In sum, Gregory has provided wonderfully diverting and enjoyable evening for those who don't mind thinking.

In case other impresarios may wish to emulate his example, it might be well to warn them that they'd better start with a Shaw or a Shakespeare and then have the good fortune to find such ingratiating personalities as the members of The First Drama Quartet. You really don't need a stage full of scenery if you have genius there.